

White-tailed Tropicbird in Cape Verde Islands in February 1999

Hugues Dufourny

On 20 February 1999, Kris De Rouck and I were sitting on the shore opposite Ilhéu de Curral Velho (15:58 N; 22:47 W), a small rocky islet off the south-eastern shore of Boavista in the Cape Verde Islands. This islet is one of the last two places in the Western Palearctic where Magnificent Frigatebird *Fregata magnificens* has been reported to breed as recently as 1992 (Hazevoet 1995). After more than four hours, the only birds we had seen were breeding Brown Boobies *Sula leucogaster*. There was no sign of frigatebirds. KDR went for a walk along the shore, hoping to find some shorebirds. I decided to stay.

At c 14:30, I saw a white bird with very long tail-streamers flying across the sea towards Ilhéu de Curral Velho. It arrived from the west and I immediately identified it as a tropicbird *Phaethon*. After a while, the bird alighted several times on the water and then continued its way towards the islet. Now, I finally had a reasonably good view and I was extremely puzzled by what I saw: a golden-yellow wash on the entire body, a completely unmarked mantle and an obvious black bar on the wing-coverts. Clearly, these features did not fit Red-billed Tropicbird *P aethereus*, a species which breeds in the Cape Verde Islands. In fact, a Red-billed Tropicbird, sitting in a breeding cavity in nearby rocks, was available for comparison.

KDR returned from his walk and I immediately informed him about the tropicbird. At that moment, it had reached Ilhéu de Curral Velho and started plunge-diving just behind the islet. The views were excellent, even though the distance was c 550 m. The bird came closer and, on one occasion, it was in front of the islet at a distance of c 400 m. Now, we were able to see the feature that clinched its identification as adult White-tailed Tropicbird *P lepturus*: an orange-yellow bill. The bird was watched until we had to leave at c 16:30. It was in view most of the time but sometimes flew back to where it had come from. Unfortunately, we were unable to take photographs because the bird never came close enough. The description below is an adapted version of the description we compiled that evening.

Description

SIZE & STRUCTURE Tropicbird, typically with narrow pointed wings, slender body and very long tail-streamers (elegantly undulating in flight). General impression smaller, less powerful and more elegant than Red-billed. Length of tail-streamers equal to or slightly exceeding that of head and body. Bill shorter than in Red-billed.

HEAD & BODY White with obvious golden-yellow wash, contrasting with black-and-white wings. Upper body plain white, washed golden-yellow, without any dark markings. Black stripe across eye, shorter than in Red-billed.

WING Forewing completely white, contrasting with wide black bar across median coverts. Rear of wing white, with translucent effect like in Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea*. Primary coverts white but several outer primaries largely black, creating black wedge in white wing; tips of these primaries white as in Red-billed. Tertiaries closest to body black, in continuity with median-covert bar, so black bars on upperwing seeming to meet on rump when bird flying fast. Black areas on upperwing together creating W-mark very similar to that of juvenile Little Gull *Larus minutus* or Black-legged Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla*, except for white interruption formed by primary coverts.

TAIL Completely white, including streamers.

BARE PARTS Bill orange-yellow.

BEHAVIOUR Flight direct, wing-beats faster than in Red-billed; flight action often reminiscent of tern, particularly Little Tern *S albigrons*. Frequently seen plunge-diving, in gannet- or booby-like manner.

VOICE No call heard.

Identification

The combination of the very long white tail-streamers, the black bars on the upperwing and the orange-yellow bill is diagnostic for adult White-tailed Tropicbird (Harrison 1985, 1987).

On geographical grounds, it is likely that the bird belonged to one of the Atlantic Ocean subspecies of White-tailed Tropicbird, namely the eastern and central Atlantic *P l ascensionis* and the western Atlantic *P l catesbyi* (cf del Hoyo et al 1992). Colour morphs exist in all five subspecies (le Corre & Jouvetin 1999). In *P l ascensionis* and *P l catesbyi*, respectively, 67% and 67%, can be classified as 'white' (no golden tone), 29% and 24% as 'white with golden streamers' (the golden

tone is restricted to the two elongated central tail-feathers) and 5% and 9% as 'golden' (all white parts of the plumage have a slight to medium golden tone, especially the streamers, head, breast, mantle and neck). For a discussion of the geographical variation in measurements and coloration among populations and subspecies of White-tailed Tropicbird, see le Corre & Jouvetin (1999).

Distribution and occurrence

White-tailed Tropicbird (also known as Yellow-billed Tropicbird) is a pantropical seabird. It breeds on islands in the Pacific, Indian and Atlantic Oceans. In the eastern and central Atlantic Ocean, it breeds on Ascension and islands in the Gulf of Guinea; in the western Atlantic Ocean, on Bermuda, the Bahamas, islands in the Caribbean and Fernando de Noronha (Harrison 1985, 1987). The closest breeding grounds to the Cape Verde Islands are c 2800 km to the south-west, on Fernando de Noronha, north-east off Brazil.

As a vagrant, White-tailed Tropicbird has already occurred close to the Cape Verde Islands twice but not in Western Palearctic waters: one at 17:05 N, 18:26 W on 8 July 1975 and one 166 km south of Santiago on 4 December 1988 (Hazevoet 1995).

Elsewhere in the North Atlantic Ocean, the wandering habits of White-tailed Tropicbird are demonstrated by frequent occurrences in May-August off North Carolina, USA (Brinkley & Patteson 1998, Patteson 1999).

In the Western Palearctic, White-tailed Tropicbird has been claimed on several occasions but none of these claims have been substantiated. An intriguing claim is that of two birds following a naval task group c 750 nautical miles west-south-west of Ireland (c 48:05 N, 28:16 W) for several hours on 10 June 1985 (Bourne 1992). According to the observer, the birds were probably White-tailed Tropicbirds but they never came close enough to establish their identity with certainty. Older claims are available in the literature (eg, Jespersen 1930). A bird photographed 80 nautical miles south of Madeira on 8 August 1997 and claimed as the first possible White-tailed Tropicbird for the Western Palearctic proved to be an adult Red-billed Tropicbird as shown by the published photograph (Birdwatch 6 (64): 56, 1997).

The record at Ilhéu de Curral Velho on 20 February 1999 will be included in Hazevoet's

1999 checklist of the birds of the Cape Verde Islands (Cornelis J Hazevoet in litt) and constitutes the first record for the Cape Verde Islands and, presumably, the Western Palearctic.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Patty Ridenour for correcting the first draft of this article, W R P Bourne for kindly replying my letters, Kris De Rouck for his pleasant company during this unforgettable trip, and the owners of *MV Residencial Bom Sossego* at Sal Rei, Boavista, for arranging the trip to Ilhéu de Curral Velho.

Samenvatting

WITSTAARTKEERKRINGVOGEL OP KAAPVERDISCHE EILANDEN IN FEBRUARI 1999 Op 20 februari 1999 werd een adulte Witstaartkeerkringvogel *Phaethon lepturus* gezien bij het eilandje Ilhéu de Curral Velho bij Boavista, Kaapverdische Eilanden. De vogel kon gedurende twee uur uitvoerig en onder gunstige omstandigheden worden bekeken door twee waarnemers op afstanden van 400-550 m; de afstand was echter te groot om foto's te maken. De vogel onderscheidde zich van Roodsnavelkeerkringvogel *P. aethereus* (broedvogel op de Kaapverdische Eilanden) door de kleinere en slankere bouw, kortere oranjegele snavel, goudgele waas over kop en lichaam, kortere donkere oogstreep en witte bovendelen met opvallende zwarte (onderbroken) W-tekening op de verder witte bovenzijde. Deze waarneming betekende het eerste geval voor de Kaapverdische Eilanden en, waarschijnlijk, het West-Palearctische gebied. Andere meldingen uit de WP zijn tot nu toe onbevestigd gebleven. Wel waren er twee eerdere gevallen buiten West-Palearctische wateren nabij de Kaapverdische Eilanden.

References

- Bourne, W R P 1992. Debatable British and Irish seabirds. *Birding World* 5: 382-390.
- Brinkley, E S & Patteson, J B 1998. Seabirds of the southern Gulf Stream. *Birding World*: 11: 421-429.
- le Corre, M & Jouvetin, P 1999. Geographical variation in the White-tailed Tropicbird *Phaethon lepturus*, with the description of a new subspecies endemic to Europa Island, southern Mozambique Channel. *Ibis* 144: 233-239.
- Harrison, P 1985. *Seabirds: an identification guide*. Second edition. London.
- Harrison, P 1987. *Seabirds of the world: a photographic guide*. London.
- Hazevoet, C J 1995. The birds of the Cape Verde Islands. BOU Check-list 13. Tring.
- del Hoyo, J, Elliott, A & Sargatal, J (editors) 1992. *Handbook of the birds of the world 1*. Barcelona.
- Jespersen, P 1930. Danish Dana Expedition Report 1920-22. *Oceanogr Rep* 7: 1-36.
- Patteson, B 1999. North Carolina pelagic birding – Part II. *Winging It* 11 (2): 1, 4-6.